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SUBJECT: A Reappraisal of Autonomous Operations

File Cuba
Manual

I. Origin of Autonomous Operations

Discussed at
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The Integrated Covert Action Program for Cuba, approved by higher authority in June 1963, provided for "support of autonomous anti-Castro Cuban groups to supplement and assist in the execution" of the other courses of action approved under this program. The concept of autonomous groups derived from Mr. Walter Rostow's proposal for a "Track Two" approach to Cuban operations. Parallel to the regular CIA-controlled and disciplined Cuban teams, CIA would extend financial aid and a minimum of advice and guidance to independent and uncontrolled Cuban leaders such as Manuel Ray. Implicit in the autonomous concept is the understanding that the leadership would possess a degree of operational self-determination which in certain circumstances, such as during the recent overflight crisis, could conflict with U.S. security interests.

In addition to a number of informal conversations between State Department and CIA officers concerning the practical application of the autonomous concept, Messrs. Alexis Johnson and Edwin Martin indicated to Mr. Richard Helms on 26 December 1963 their desire that CIA proceed as soon as feasible to provide "Track Two" assistance to Mr. Manuel Ray.

As incorporated into the June 1963 program, the following "rules of engagement" were set forth to govern the conduct of these autonomous operations:

(1) It is the keystone of autonomous operations that they will be executed exclusively by Cuban nationals motivated by the conviction that the overthrow of the Castro/Communist regime must be accomplished by Cubans, both inside and outside Cuba acting in consonance.

(2) The effort will probably cost many Cuban lives. If this cost in lives becomes unacceptable to the U.S. conscience, autonomous operations can be effectively halted by the withdrawal of U.S. support; but once halted, it cannot be resumed.

(3) All autonomous operations will be mounted outside the territory of the United States.

(4) The United States Government must be prepared to deny publicly any participation in these acts no matter how loud or even how accurate may be the reports of U.S. complicity.

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(5) The United States presence and direct participation in the operation would be kept to an absolute minimum. Before entering into an operational relationship with a group, the U.S. representative will make it clear that his Government has no intention of intervening militarily, except to counter intervention by the Soviets. An experienced CIA officer would be assigned to work with the group in a liaison capacity. He would provide general advice as requested as well as funds and necessary material support. He may be expected to influence but not control the conduct of operations.

(6) These operations would not be undertaken within a fixed time schedule.

In a letter dated 6 March 1963 to Mr. McGeorge Bundy reviewing various operational problems in connection with Cuba, Mr. Desmond Fitzgerald made the following observations pertaining to autonomous operations:

"As you know, again as part of the June plan, we are supporting two "autonomous" exile groups headed respectively by Manuel Artime and Manolo Ray. In both cases we have gone to maximum lengths to preserve the deniability of U.S. complicity in the operation. Artime, who now possesses the greater mechanical and paramilitary apparatus, has required a good deal of hand-feeding although still within the context of deniability. He will probably not be ready for his operations against Cuba before April or May of this year. He possesses most of his hardware and maritime equipment and has negotiated geographical and political bases in Central America. Manolo Ray has been handled on a much more independent basis. We have furnished him money and a certain amount of general advice. He does not possess the physical accoutrements that Artime has and is probably not as well equipped in terms of professional planning. Ray has a better political image inside Cuba among supporters of the revolution and has recently acquired, according to reports, some of the other left-wing exile activist groups such as Gutierrez Menoyo and his Second Front of the Escambray. He is said to be ready to move into Cuba on a clandestine basis late this spring. His first weapon will be sabotage inside Cuba, apparently not externally-mounted hit-and-run raids.

"If U.S. policy should demand that the "autonomous" operations be suspended, we could of course cut off our support immediately. Artime and his group might or might

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not disintegrate at once. Manolo Ray almost certainly would continue. Both groups are based outside the United States and our only real leverage on them is through our financial support but withdrawal of this support would probably be fatal to their operations in time. A cutoff of this support, even though this support has been untraceable in a technical sense, would have a considerable impact within the exile community. U.S. support is rumored, especially in the case of Artinez, and the collapse of the only remaining evidence of exile action against Castro would hit the exile community hard which is what it in turn would do to its favorite target, U.S. policy. The exile of today, however, appears to have lost much of his fervor and, in any case, does not seem to have the capacity for causing domestic trouble which he had a year or two ago. The Central American countries in which the exile bases exist would be greatly confused, although we have carefully never indicated to the governments of these countries any more than U.S. sympathy for the "autonomous" groups."

This letter, including the paragraphs cited above, was submitted to the Special Group on 20 March 1964. On the same date, another memorandum entitled "Status Report on Autonomous Cuban Exile Groups" was presented to the Special Group to alert that body to the fact that both the Ray and Artinez groups had reached a stage of operational readiness in which actions against Cuba could be expected at any time. The memorandum also advised the Special Group as follows:

"The possibility of imminent unilateral operations on the part of the autonomous groups is brought to the attention of the Special Group at this time since it is related to the question of the future of CIA-controlled sabotage and harassment operations now under review by higher authority. This relationship was described in Part V of the memorandum entitled "Review of Current Program of Covert Action Against Cuba," dated 24 January 1964, submitted by the Coordinator of Cuban Affairs to the Special Group. The paper also noted that if a policy decision is made to terminate sabotage and harassment operations for the autonomous groups as well as for CIA, it will be necessary to terminate support for the autonomous groups as CIA would not be in a position to insure that they would refrain from raids and sabotage even if so requested. In fact, it now appears likely that neither group will disintegrate at once upon notification of termination of U.S. subsidies. While withdrawal of U.S. financial aid and moral support would probably be fatal to their operations in time,

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they are likely to make strenuous efforts to find other sources of support. In so doing and in order to prove their viability to potential supporters, they would, in their desperation, probably feel compelled to launch one or more dramatic raids against Cuba."

On 13 May the Port of Pilon in southern Oriente was struck by one of Artimo's commando groups. Warehouses were severely damaged and, according to an official Cuban announcement, approximately 70,000 tons of sugar valued at about one million dollars were destroyed. We understand that Artimo is planning another raid on two radar installations early in June.

Manuel Ray departed on 18 May for Cuba amid a major publicity campaign sparked by the New York Times. Ray's exact whereabouts are not known as of this writing, but it is believed that he has not yet landed on Cuban soil.

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II. Current Status

Against this background, the question of continued U.S. support for these autonomous groups has once again been raised. It has been suggested that a reappraisal of autonomous operations would be in order if, as a result of an OAS resolution on the Venezuelan arms cache, aggression is to be redefined to include subversion. It is argued that the U.S. should, if it is to exploit the OAS resolution, not itself engage in the proscribed activities. The U.S. would have to adopt a "clean hands" position vis-a-vis Cuba and this state of cleanliness must be maintained indefinitely if the U.S. is to remain in a position to apply sanctions against Castro should he again be caught red-handed.

III. Considerations Affecting U.S. Support to Autonomous Groups

It is assumed that it remains U.S. policy to get rid of Fidel Castro by any acceptable means. If this premise is correct the first task of the policymaker in examining the issues herein presented is to balance the two courses of action proposed -- i.e. (a) a continuation of autonomous operations and (b) an exclusive reliance on OAS sanctions -- in terms of their effectiveness in achieving our basic purpose.

When the June 1963 program, of which autonomous operations are a part, was approved by higher authority, it was agreed that this program presented the maximum that could be done along covert lines; that each part of the program supported each other; and that the eventual success of the program would rest on the simultaneous application of all of the courses of action agreed to, including sabotage and harassment, and their interaction on each other. Although no assessment of chance of success of this program could be presented on a percentile basis, it was understood that the program would not have been appropriately tested if not given a full 18 months to run.

In January 1964 unilaterally controlled sabotage operations were stood down, but this partial erosion of the program has been in some measure compensated for, at least in psychological warfare terms, by the recent widely reported activities of the autonomous groups which reached a climax of sorts with the Pilon raid and Ray's reported departure for Cuba under dramatic circumstances.

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Despite the truncated nature of the program, it appears to us that there have been many indications of success. We have been able to establish a direct correlation between the series of minor sabotage operations during the latter part of 1963 and a rise in internal resistance and sabotage. The Pilon raid and news of Ray's plans to return to Cuba has again set off military alerts and other internal measures not observed in Cuba since the October 1962 missile crisis.

The fact that Castro was willing under such slim provocation to strip his factories and cane fields would indicate a degree of psychological threat operating on his regime far out of proportion to the physical threat or risks taken by us.

The legal path involves reliance upon some form of OAS resolution applying future sanctions against Cuba in the event she is once again caught red-handed in subversive activities. In the final analysis the application of these sanctions will rest with the U.S. after further consultation with the OAS. Clearly the punishment contemplated is the U.S. use of armed force whether it be by way of blockade, invasion or selective destruction of Cuban targets. Will the U.S. propose such action and will the OAS in the final analysis approve it?

It is submitted that a clear choice need not be made between these two alternatives. Having already denied ourselves unilaterally controlled raiding actions and having taken precaution not to leave provable fingerprints on the autonomous operations, may we not proceed along both tracks in their current direction, denying stoutly our involvement in the illegal activities and thereby greatly increasing the odds of achieving our national purpose? We are certain to be accused of responsibility for other exile activities in which we are not involved. Our innocence will be as difficult to establish as would be our involvement in the case of our autonomous operations.

IV. Consequences of Terminating U.S. Support for Autonomous Groups

If as a consequence of following the "legal track" it is felt that U.S. support to autonomous groups should cease, the following considerations should be weighed in reaching a firm decision:

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(1) It must be assumed that suspension of support to autonomous groups will come as a bitter blow to the leaders who will lose no time in making public their views and interpretations of this action. The cessation of support will be interpreted as a further indication that the U.S. is no longer interested in the active liberation of Cuba and is moving in the direction of rapprochement and accommodation with the Castro regime. The effect of this will be to demoralize further the anti-Castro Cubans both inside and outside Cuba and to sap what resistance spirit still remains. We have had many reports to the effect that highly placed persons inside Cuba now feel that Castro's greatest mistake was his break with the U.S. Perhaps even Fidel believes this also. A cessation of anti-Castro raids and other operations would immediately be read as a sign of U.S. detente with Castro and a consequent prestige-restoring victory for Castro's tight-rope policies.

It must also be expected that the significance of ceasing support of these groups will be exaggerated and misinterpreted in Latin America and Europe, thereby setting off another round of diplomatic, political and economic moves toward an accommodation with the Castro regime. In this atmosphere, it is possible that even the credibility of the OAS resolution may be adversely affected. One can only guess at the domestic repercussions of this publicity, but it is likely that anti-administration elements will attempt to exploit the situation to their political advantage, particularly if it comes before the November elections.

(2) The governments of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, after being assured by U.S. officials that support of Artimo and Ray would not conflict with U.S. foreign policy, have afforded these groups base facilities on their soil. If it is decided that U.S. support for autonomous groups should cease, it follows that the U.S. would have to advise these governments that their continued support of the groups has become detrimental to U.S. policy. Without such advice these governments would continue to support the autonomous groups.

(3) As pointed out in the 30 March memorandum to the Special Group cited above, it appears likely that neither one of the autonomous groups will disintegrate immediately after notification of termination of U.S.

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aid. In order to demonstrate their viability to potential supporters and contributors, these groups are likely to feel compelled to continue and perhaps step up these raids, in defiance of U.S. wishes if necessary. It is possible that the frustration and indignation that would flow from a termination of support would lead to a choice of activities on the part of these groups that would have a higher "noise level" than at present, including revelations of past U.S. support.

(4) Adoption of the "legal track" as a basis for dealing with the Castro problem and the attendant application of the "clean hands" thesis would have ramifications for covert activities directed against Cuba that go far beyond autonomous raiding operations. Infiltration and caching operations for subversive purposes such as those presently being attempted by Ray would also be included. The principle of "clean hands" must also be applied to all covert maritime infiltration/exfiltration operations for intelligence collection purposes as well as caching operations for internal intelligence and resistance operations. This would result in a reduction in our intelligence collection and support capabilities. To emphasize this point, it is worth recalling that the "Rox incident" in October 1963, one of the most widely publicized and commented-upon operations in the past two years, involved only an infiltration and caching operation. No sabotage or other form of violence was contemplated for this mission. Yet the exposure of the mother ship and the resulting publicity constituted as much a violation of the "clean hands" principle as any sabotage mission. Thus, little useful purpose would be served in terminating support to autonomous groups in order to adhere to the "legal track" and "clean hands" concepts while other covert operations, equally susceptible of being exposed as "subversive" in nature, involving maritime infiltration and caching, continue as before.

V. Conclusions

Termination of U.S. support for the autonomous groups will not necessarily assure the cessation of externally-mounted commando raids on Cuba. In fact, it is likely that the first reaction of the autonomous groups will be to conduct higher "noise level" activities than at present,

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including, perhaps, revelations of past U.S. support. There may also be exile raids with which we have no connection, e.g. the SFNE or Alpha 66 -- for which the U.S. would automatically be blamed.

Adoption of the "legal track" would have ramifications for covert operations extending far beyond autonomous raiding actions. Maritime infiltration/exfiltration for intelligence and caching operations, both autonomous and unilateral CIA, would have to be included in the ban if the "clean hands" principle is to be applied in a consistent and meaningful manner.

The cessation of autonomous commando operations -- the only remaining external sabotage activity since unilateral CIA operations of this type were stood down in January 1964 -- would effectively kill the remaining chances of carrying out the objectives of the Integrated Covert Action Program initiated in June 1963.

While the cost would be high, it might well be worth the sacrifice if the U.S. is prepared for armed intervention in Cuba and if the OAS will unequivocally support it.

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